
The presentation of self in résumés: an intercultural approach

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Abstract

In this paper, résumés in two languages and two cultures, Peninsular Spanish and American English, are analysed. For this qualitative analysis, we have relied on the dual perspective proposed by Flowerdew (2005) which postulates a complementary usage of linguistic and ethnographic approaches to the study of genre.

The analysis of discourse is based on tenets of genre analysis (Swales 1990; Unger 2007) which have traditionally constituted a substantial part of the theoretical basis of the LSP field. However, it also introduces tenets from sociolinguistics and pragmatics (Brown & Levinson 1987; Scollon & Scollon 2001) as résumés crucially involve the presentation of self – namely the construction of professional identity of candidates (de Fina *et al.* 2006; Dyer & Keller-Cohen 2000). The ethnographic approach consists of interviews of recruiters from both cultures to find out what their expectations are relative to applicants' presentation of selves.

The results, although tentative, indicate that cultural expectations in terms of what constitutes an adequate résumé vary between the two cultures, especially with respect to the type of personal information provided and the lexico-syntactic structures that candidates use to distance themselves from their achievements.

1. Introduction

An important premise of the teaching of Languages for Specific Purposes is the use of authentic material in the classroom (Robinson 1991). Although today's extended use of new technologies makes many materials easily available, the selection of cul-

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turally appropriate models still remains a difficult task. Accordingly, this paper analyses résumés that target positions in multinational companies in two languages and two cultures, American English and Peninsular Spanish, and focuses on how job candidates present themselves and construct their professional identities. We view résumés as institutional, autobiographical narratives in which candidates construct their professional identities by positioning themselves as experts.

The résumé as a genre is grounded in a specific discourse system's ideology (Scollon & Scollon 2001) and is thus expected to vary from culture to culture (Unger 2007: 255). Since identity construction is a situated, cultural phenomenon (de Fina *et al.* 2006) it also varies cross-culturally. In an increasingly globalized world, it becomes essential for ESP practitioners to learn more about résumé writing practices and their assessments by members of the same community of practice in different cultures to avoid miscommunication and misperceptions that may end in an unsuccessful job search.

Résumé writing is the focus of a myriad of textbooks and how-to guides, both in print and online. A review of this literature (see Culwell-Block & Sellers 1994) as well as surveys of individuals' opinions on best practices (Blackburn-Brockman & Belanger 2001: 41) conclusively show that "no ideal or correct résumé format exists" and point to the lack of agreement amongst different sources. There seems to be a consensus, though, that the literature on job searches needs to be more grounded in research. Bird & Puglisi (1986: 31) observed: "Anyone who surveys the literature available on résumé preparation is certain to be struck by the fact that there is an enormous range of advice on the subject, very little of which rests on a solid empirical base". Fifteen years later, Blackburn-Brockman & Belanger (2001: 30) expressed similar concerns. Contrastive analyses of résumés are even scarcer. In her seminal work on contrastive rhetoric, Connor (1996) commented on the fact that although standards for résumés seem to vary from culture to culture, no published research existed on the topic. Our records indicate that there are just two published, cross-cultural studies of résumés: Fries (1986) and Pan *et al.* (2002). With this paper, we hope to contribute to fill this void by presenting a detailed, qualitative genre analysis of résumés in two languages and two cultures – Peninsular Spanish and American English – complemented by an ethnographic study of ten expert members of the business discourse community.

2. Résumé as a genre

Résumés constitute a genre: an institutional, written genre. Following Bourdieu (1991: 8), we understand institutions as durable sets of social relations that endow individuals with power, status and different types of resources. A type of discourse or interaction is institutional if the professional or institutional identities of participants are relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged (Drew & Heritage 1992).

The notion of genre, text type or discourse type has been approached from different theoretical backgrounds (for a recent discussion of different theoretical ap-

proaches to the notion of genre, see Unger 2007). For the purposes of this paper, we will define genre in Swales's (1990: 58) terms as:

A class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style [...] exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience.

Thus, a given communicative purpose triggers a particular genre, which is realized by a specific move structure or functionally distinct stages along which the genre unfolds. The move structure, in turn, is realized by rhetorical strategies or formal choices of content and style.

The communicative purpose of the *résumé* is to market the candidate and set him/her apart from other candidates. Because *résumés* constitute an institutional genre, candidates are constrained in their *résumé* design, and allowed only those contributions (in terms of move structure and rhetorical strategies) which are sanctioned by the institution. One goal of our paper is to analyse and contrast the move structure and the rhetorical strategies that realize Spanish and US *résumés* included in the corpus. Although the genre's communicative purpose does not vary, the move structure and the rhetorical strategies seem to differ in both sub-corpora. We are especially interested in relating the moves and rhetorical strategies to the construction of professional identity.

In contrast to Swales's more textual approach, Scollon & Scollon (2001: 5) argue that genres are better understood as being part of a given discourse system. According to the authors, discourse systems coincide with James Paul Gee's Discourses with a capital D, and comprise everything which can be said or talked about or symbolized within a particular domain, e.g. 'the discourse of law', 'the discourse of entertainment'. They divide discourse systems into involuntary (those to which members have no choice in belonging, such as age, gender, or ethnicity) and voluntary (goal-oriented discourse systems, usually institutional structures which have been formed for specific purposes, such as corporations or governments) and define them on the basis of four main characteristics (*ibid.*: 178-179):

1. members of a given discourse system will hold a common ideological position and recognize a sense of extra-discourse features that define them as a group;
2. socialization of members is accomplished through preferred forms of discourse;
3. a set of preferred forms of discourse – face strategies, certain genres, specialized lexicon etc. used by members serve as symbols of membership and identity;
4. face relationships are prescribed for discourse members or between members and outsiders.

We continue our discussion of résumés as a genre, a preferred form of discourse of the voluntary, or goal-directed, corporate discourse system, grounded in Utilitarian ideology, and prescribed between discourse members and outsiders, and describe how candidates construct their professional identity and establish face relationships ascribing to and thus ratifying, albeit in diverse ways, the underlying dominant ideology of western corporate discourse.

2.1. *Western corporate discourse and the presentation of self*

Scollon & Scollon (2001) describe western corporate discourse as the most representative example of the Utilitarian Discourse system, grounded in Utilitarian ideology. This ideology champions individuality, empiricism and rationalism and has shaped the style known as C-B-S (Clarity-Brevity-Sincerity) (Lanham 1974): the dominant communicative system in the business and governmental worlds (see Pan *et al.* 2002 for an updated review). The C-B-S style is at the basis of most manuals or how-to guides on how to write your résumé, and informs the scholarly discussion on the subject.

Also, the corporate discourse system prescribes a face politeness system of symmetrical solidarity for public discourse among members. In a solidarity politeness system, participants see themselves as being in equal social position – there is no feeling of power difference or distance between them – and both use politeness strategies of involvement (Scollon & Scollon 2001: 55) – roughly equivalent to Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategies. Due to this Utilitarian, democratic ideology that underlies corporate discourse in the western world, candidates need to strike a balance between asserting their expertise and not coming across as arrogant. One of the main difficulties of writing a résumé, according to Pan *et al.* (2002: 61), is that it somehow runs against our intuitions of what constitutes socially appropriate behaviour:

[...]we are taught as children not to brag about ourselves and our accomplishments. In most societies, it is felt that it is more polite to let others discover our qualities rather than just boldly telling others how great we are. Of course, this varies from group to group and what seems modest in one group might seem boastful in another. Nevertheless, it is very rare in human societies to have a place or a time where the whole purpose is to make the strongest possible statement of our own qualities. From this point of view, our intuitions go completely against the idea of writing a résumé.

Along the same lines, both Brown & Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) point out the widespread cultural constraints against self-praise. Although acknowledging that some cultures' ethos is characterized by boasting or by the non-applicability of self-deprecation or self-humbling strategies, Brown & Levinson include bragging in their list of face-threatening acts against the hearer's positive face. The rationale for this inclusion lies in the fact that just as raising the other implies a low-

ering of the self, a raising of the self may imply a lowering of the other (Brown & Levinson 1987: 39). This seems intuitively true for the democratic ideals of western culture present in the two corpora under scrutiny.

We view résumés as institutional, autobiographical narratives (Dyer & Keller-Cohen 2000) in which candidates construct their professional identity by positioning themselves (Davis & Harré 1990) as competent and knowledgeable. Ochs (1993) argues that individuals co-construct their different identities and those of others by verbally performing certain acts and displaying certain (epistemic and affective) stances. Those acts and stances are arbitrary and conventional and may vary cross-culturally, i.e. communities often differ in the choice of acts and stances for building a particular identity. Scollon & Scollon (2001: 180) point out that identity within a voluntary discourse system is often displayed through attention to the goals of the group and by expressing its ideology, thus the construction of the identity of candidates is constrained by the goals of the corporate world and its ideology. Candidates' agency in their identity construction is limited by the Utilitarian ideology.

The Utilitarian ideology articulates the democratic ideal of equality among all members of the corporate discourse system. However, this is in sharp contrast to the communicative purpose of the résumé which is to make the writer stand out and catch the attention of prospective employers. We argue that the stance that candidates take to construct their professional identities within this discourse system can be paraphrased as *primus inter pares*, the first among equals. Candidates need to find a way both to highlight their expertise and to maintain the positive face needs of the members of the corporate discourse system. This is accomplished twofold: (a) by abiding by the constraints of the résumé genre in the given culture and (b) by candidates distancing themselves from their accomplishments. By choosing mitigation strategies to distance themselves from their accomplishments, candidates are recreating at the micro-level the dominant ideologies that underlie the discourse system of which the résumé genre is a part (Blackledge 2002: 67; Miller forthcoming).

In what follows, we explore how candidates in both subcorpora create their résumés by instantiating the perceived genre specifications in both cultures. We pay special attention to the way they construct their professional identities in terms of how much personal information they provide. Pan *et al.* (2002: 69), in one of the few studies that tackles intercultural aspects of résumé writing (see also Fries 1986), point out that “[the] conflict between personal and professional information is the most significant aspect of self-presentation in professional communication in intercultural settings”. We argue that it is not just the amount or type of information that varies among different cultural realizations of résumé, but also the ways in which candidates construct their professional identities, especially with respect to the choice of the rhetorical strategies they use to distance themselves from their accomplishments.

3. Method

3.1. *Data gathering and analysis*

For this descriptive analysis of résumés, we relied on the dual approach proposed by Flowerdew (2005), who postulates a complementary usage of linguistic and ethnographic approaches to the study of genre. Thus, the analysis is twofold. First, we carry out a qualitative, linguistic analysis of the data – 30 résumés (14 from the US and 16 from Spain: we will refer to them as *USR#1* or *SPR#1* etc.) – which we complement and contextualize with the information obtained through an ethnographic study.

All subjects had used the version of the résumé included in the study to apply for their current job. Individuals, such as the ones included in our study, usually keep a résumé on file that they update or modify slightly to target different positions along their professional lives. At the time of the application, they were all external candidates. At present, all candidates hold positions at different manufacturing and retail multinational companies. The expertise of the subjects ranged from finance and engineering to human resources. Whereas some corporations specialize in marketing, financial services etc., most commonly corporations – both manufacturing and retail – will be composed of large sectors made up of a plethora of departments, such as marketing, sales, finance, accountancy, etc. Individuals with diverse backgrounds will submit their résumés either through a recruiting company or directly to the human resources department of a given corporation.

Many genre analysts (Swales 2000; Flowerdew 2005; Offord-Gray & Aldred 1998) emphasize the importance of gathering contextual information through interviews to understand how the speech events/texts under investigation fit in the overall communicative context. Accordingly, we also interviewed ten members of upper management at different companies (five in the US and five in Spain) who are executive decision-makers in terms of hiring candidates and thus review résumés often. They are, for this particular analysis, the expert members of the parent discourse community alluded to by Swales (1990).

Each informant brought to the study an average of over 20 years experience in the business world. Two of our informants in the US hold leading global positions in the human resources department of two Fortune 500 companies. The others were a vice-president of sales, a vice-president of special projects and a Chief Financial Officer, also working for Fortune 500, publicly traded companies. Our Spanish informants were three human resources executives, and two general managers. They all work for different multinational manufacturing and retail companies. Their in-depth knowledge of the corporate world and the function and form of the résumé within it provide invaluable information and a window into corporate practices which complements and supports the data obtained through the linguistic section of the analysis. These are the types of gatekeepers that the subjects included in our study will encounter in their job application process.

The interviews took place simultaneously with the gathering and analysis of

the linguistic corpus and were performed either in person, or by phone. We put together a specific interview protocol and – at the end of the interview – asked informants to evaluate one of the *résumés* contained in the corpus. Interviews were recorded, and the more significant information was transcribed and translated into English, where necessary. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes.

Subjects, both *résumé* authors and informants, were approached informally by the authors in person, via phone or via email, along the lines of Milroy's (1980) "friend of a friend" sampling procedure. Both of the authors have close ties to the corporate world which granted us access to the data and informants. A summary of the research goals was provided to the subjects as well as a consent form. When any of the information relates to the insights gained in conversation with our informants, we will refer to them as either IUS#1, ISP#2 etc.

Résumés are private information, thus they can only be released by authors themselves. Also, although access to *résumé* information can be obtained from different Internet sites (see www.theladders.com, for example), in order to make sure that all *résumés* had been successfully employed to secure positions in the corporate world, and had accordingly been validated as legitimate samples of the genre, we had to approach subjects individually. These circumstances limited the number of *résumés* that could be included in the first part of the analysis. Finding similar samples in the two languages/cultures object of our study on which to base our contrastive analysis was an added hurdle. The difficulties involved in the gathering of the data might be the reason why the *résumé* genre is under-researched, and contrastive analyses are so rare. As indicated in the introductory section, researchers in the field often point out that most accounts of *résumés* are not data- or research-driven.

One of the two – according to our records – existing contrastive studies of *résumés*, namely Pan *et al.* (2002), also combines the linguistic with the ethnographic approach. Although the authors indicate they had conducted a study of *résumés* – size of sample and other specifics undisclosed – they base the insightful, intercultural contrastive analysis of *résumés* on the assessment of three focus groups – number of subjects undisclosed – in Finland, Beijing and Hong Kong who were asked to review and assess two *résumés*, written in English, from professionals in Beijing and Hong Kong.

As indicated above, our analysis is twofold. First, we concentrate on the more textual aspects of *résumés*. *Résumés* are organized into sections, which we have associated with Swales's (1990) moves (see Tables 1, 2, 3 & 4). The presence or absence of a given move, together with the order in which it appears and its degree of complexity and other formatting regularities observed are recorded and contrasted. Since length seems to be a crucial aspect of the discussion regarding what constitutes a 'proper' *résumé*, we also include a comparison of this feature across the corpus. These textual aspects are related to the underlying C-B-S style prevalent in western corporate discourse. Second, we focus on two specific rhetorical strategies: pronoun deletion and nominalizations and relate them to face relations and identity construction.

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1 Formatting and the C-B-S style

Clarity is related to the choices of chronological résumé style and bullet points which highlight relevant information and facilitate reading and understanding. Pan *et al.* (2002) mention that there are two types of résumés: functional and chronological. Bright & Earl (2002) add a third, hybrid type that contains features of both. Functional résumés tend to be used when candidates are trying to change careers. All résumés included in the corpus are chronological, which constitutes the obvious choice as all candidates wish to remain within the corporate world. The résumés in the US subcorpus follow a reverse chronological order in the arrangement of the data, but only nine in the Spanish corpus do the same (see Table 1). Of the remaining résumés, four use chronological order and two do not include dates.

All informants preferred the chronological résumé format. They mentioned that it allows them to see the candidate's career progression, see if there are any gaps, and – if there are – to ask the reasons for the gaps during the interview. This view is also supported in the literature. Beagrie (2007: 28) advises candidates: “[...] employers will want to see your employment history. Don't be tempted to leave out jobs or years”. The reason why, according to Bright & Earl (2001), is that when recruiters noticed gaps in career history that were not explained in their résumé, they thought the applicant was less honest than average. Honesty and perceived trustworthiness are paramount in the hiring process, as we will discuss below.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, in terms of formatting their relevant professional experience, candidates consistently used bullet points, sometimes after a brief summary of responsibilities and achievement for each position. All informants but IUS#4 and ISP#1 agreed that this was the best way to introduce professional experience, since it was easy and quick to read. IUS#4 indicated that he prefers the narrative style, rather than bullet points and action verbs, but he acknowledged he is in the minority. All informants mentioned that a substantial part of the interview consists in going through those bullet points and assessing how significant candidates' contributions were to the achievements and successes listed.

Table 1. Formatting conventions in Spanish and US résumés

FORMATTING	Spanish résumés (16)	US résumés (14)
Bullet points	15	14
Reverse order	9	14
Length-pages	Avg. 2.1	Avg. 2.6

Nonetheless, there seems to be some disagreement among the experts on this point. Mackiewicz (2006), in his review of Bennet (2005), mentioned that Bennet advocates the use of a paragraph or a blurb for each description. Mackiewicz disagrees with Bennet arguing that, as people who read résumés scan them for ap-

proximately eight to ten seconds, this quick scan works better with the bullets than with descriptions presented in paragraph form.

The length of *résumés* in both subcorpora ranges from one to four pages, two pages being the most frequent length for Spanish *résumés* (average 2.1), and three pages for US *résumés* (average 2.6).

US informants all agreed that a *résumé* should not be longer than two pages, even though most *résumés* in the US subcorpus were three pages long or even longer. Four of our US informants – IUS#1, IUS#3, IUS#4 and IUS#5 – felt especially strongly about it. ISP#5 stated that too long a *résumé* could lead to immediate rejection. IUS#2 and ISP#2 thought two pages should be the norm. However, they were aware that it was difficult for people with much experience to fit everything into two pages. If candidates did so, one got the sense that a lot of relevant information had been left out.

We see from the data that most *résumés* do not abide by the two-page ‘rule’. This is probably because most of the *résumés* we reviewed, especially those in the US subcorpus, belonged to the more experienced candidates. The candidates who had one-page *résumés* were less experienced. However, as stated above, all the *résumés* had been successfully used to secure positions in the corporate world, which seems to lend support to Blackburn-Brockman & Belanger’s (2001: 42) comment to the effect that: “No rigorous research exists providing evidence that recruiters are more likely to interview candidates with one-page *résumés* or perhaps, even more importantly, that a two-page *résumé* invites ‘automatic rejection’”. On the basis of our data, neither do three-page *résumés*.

The C-B-S style places a lot of emphasis on sincerity: you have to be honest and only include in the *résumé* facts that are accurate and can be documented. All informants, both US and Spanish, agreed that honesty was paramount and that there was no compromise at that level: all facts had to be true. In fact, they emphasized that one of the main goals of the job interview is to assess whether the claims made in the *résumé* are true, and, if so, to what extent. As we discuss in the rhetorical strategies section, it is a generic feature of the *résumé* genre to elide personal pronouns or personal inflectional verb endings. Therefore, candidates may claim agency in processes to which they were only peripheral participants. Most questions in the interview process are directed towards eliciting responses that will provide the interviewer with a sense of how experienced or knowledgeable the candidate really is.

In addition, our informants indicated that they do confirm relevant information contained in *résumés*, either through their own HR departments, outsourcing that function to agencies which specialize in background checks etc. or through the recruiting firm (if headhunters were involved in the hiring of a specific candidate). IUS#4 remembered a situation in which an otherwise “perfect” employee had changed the dates on his *résumé* to “hide” a three month employment with another company that had ended somewhat abruptly. When his employers found out that he had altered his *résumé*, they fired him, although they were very happy with his performance. If he had been forthcoming about that in-

formation and explained it during the interview it would most likely not have influenced the hiring decision. Because he had hidden this, it was perceived as dishonest and ended up costing him the job.

All informants mentioned that if some discrepancy was found in the résumé of a loyal, productive employee they would all give him/her the benefit of the doubt and would talk to the person, seeking an explanation before further action was taken.

Although one would expect sincerity to be a given, it is the general impression of our informants that this is not necessarily the case, and that different processes need to be in place to assess the veracity of the claims made.

3.2.2. *Move structure and order*

The moves present and the preferred order in each subcorpus can be seen in Table 2. Table 3 shows how these moves are distributed in the résumés.

Table 2. Types of moves and preferred order

Spanish résumés	US résumés
Name	Name
Contact information	Contact information
Education	Summary of qualifications/profile
Experience	Experience
Languages	Education
Computer expertise	Other
Other	

Table 3. Moves in Spanish and US résumés

	Spanish résumés (16)	US résumés (14)
Name	16	14
Contact information	16	14
Initial summary	3	14
Personal objectives	4	8
Education ¹	1/14-2/2	3/10-2/3-1/1
Experience	2/7-1/3-3/3-4/3	2/12-1/2
Computer	2/2-3/3-4/1-5/1	8
Expertise Other data	3/5-4/2-1/1-5/1	7
Languages	3/5-2/3-4/1	2

¹ First numbers indicate order of appearance in résumés, number after stroke indicates the number of résumés where it appears in this order. Ex. 2/5 indicates that this type of information appears in the second move in five résumés.

There were only two *résumés* in the Spanish subcorpus where Experience preceded Education, and the candidates did not differ substantially in terms of career length from the others. Spanish informants stated that the logical order of the information in a *résumé* should be Education followed by Experience, since the former supports the latter.

However, in the US subcorpus, Experience almost always preceded Education. In those cases where education was positioned more towards the beginning, the *résumés* belonged to less experienced candidates. For entry level positions or early in one's career, when candidates do not have much experience, more emphasis is given to education and more details are provided (G.P.A. graduated *summa cum laude*, etc.). IUS#1 and IUS#5 did not have strong feelings about the placement of these Moves, as long as both were included. IUS#1 indicated that Education becomes less and less significant as Experience accumulates.

In both subcorpora, information on education was restricted to tertiary education with reference mostly to undergraduate and graduate degrees. A few *résumés* also included information on professional development courses.

Almost all US *résumés* started by summarizing the candidate's qualifications, though only three Spanish ones included a summary. IUS#4 said that was very helpful. He mentioned that people are busy, and one can only spend a given amount of time on each *résumé* – an average time of 45 seconds (Culwell-Block & Sellers 1994) – so a good summary might be the difference between a *résumé* being further explored or not. IUS#1 and IUS#5 were also partial to initial summaries of qualifications. They preferred them to a statement of career objectives, and stated that a good summary was certainly an enticement to further explore the *résumé*.

An important difference was Languages. Just two people included knowledge of languages other than English in US *résumés*, which is not surprising in the US context where very few people are bilingual, or pursue study of foreign languages further than secondary school level. In the two cases where a second language was included, both candidates declared they were fluent in Spanish. IUS#5 stated that knowledge of languages is an added value to a *résumé* in the US corporate context. On the other hand, Languages was a separate section in nine of the Spanish *résumés*, and all candidates mentioned their command of some foreign language, mostly English. For our Spanish informants, this is usually one of the main requirements, since all their companies have international relations and require their executives to be multilingual.

Computer expertise was also a section in six of the Spanish *résumés*, and eight of the US *résumés*. IUS#1 pointed out that computer expertise is a skill that would be expected to be included for entry level or support positions, while upper management is expected to have experience managing system implementations.

None of the *résumés* in the US subcorpus included personal objectives, and only two Spanish applicants mentioned them, one of them educated in Costa Rica and Poland. These results contrast with McDowell (1987) who included job objectives/career goals within the most important part of the *résumé*. IUS#2, IUS#3 and

IUS#4 all mentioned that while it is very informative to know what the applicant aspires to, this information might be a double-edged sword, as there might be a mismatch between stated objectives and position interviewed for or between the place where the applicant is in his/her career and what the stated goals are. IUS#1 tends to skip career objectives and go directly to Experience or Summary of qualifications because he feels career objectives can be artificially tailored to match company objectives. Some of our Spanish informants, ISP#1, ISP#3, indicated that career objectives tend to be included in the cover letter. Also, ISP#2 pointed out: “You may find this type of information in résumés of applicants to executive positions. In any case, it is one of the essential questions we include in the interview”.

Regarding job transitions, none of the US résumés, and only one Spanish résumé, included reasons why previous jobs were left. IUS#4 indicated that, due to space restrictions on résumés, candidates may include a sentence or two on why they left a previous position, but this could lead to misinterpretations or erroneous perceptions by prospective employers. ISP#1 pointed out that this type of information is usually included in the cover letter. All informants agreed that the place to discuss this issue is during the interview, although IUS#5 was not opposed to having this type of information included briefly in the résumé especially in reference to recent jobs. As has often been the case, discrepancy is also found regarding this point in the literature as Beagrie (2007: 29) finds it “[...] perfectly acceptable to add a line about why you left each position”.

3.2.3. *The presentation of self*

3.2.3.1. *How much personal information is too much personal information?*

US law prohibits the inclusion of personal information such as gender, age, race, marital status, etc. both in the résumé and as part of the interview process (although, of course, many of those characteristics become quite obvious in a face-to-face interview). Thus, as can be seen in Table 4, no US résumés included any pictures, date of birth (DOB), place of birth, marital status, or driver licence/ID number. The only exception to this rule was found in USR#13. However, although US-educated, with most of his work experience obtained in American corporations and targeting a position within another American corporation, the candidate was born outside the US. This might be a factor that could have influenced the amount of personal information given.

Conversely, only two Spanish résumés did not include a picture, and all but two included the candidate’s DOB. Place of birth, national identification card or passport number and even marital status are also part of the personal information commonly found in résumés in Spain. Moreover, this information was deemed as very relevant by our Spanish informants. ISP#2 stated that, for their company, it is essential to find young people that can be given on-the-job training, and that education and professional experience can only be gauged in reference to the age of the candidate. IUS#5 stated, in reference to the résumés of their European candidates: “we usually find in them more personal information than we care to know”.

Table 4. Personal and contact information included in Spanish and US résumés

	Spanish résumés (16)	US résumés (14)
PERSONAL INFORMATION		
Photo	13	0
DOB	14	1
Marital status	3	1
National Identification card number	8	0
Birth place	7	1
Driver's licence	8	1
CONTACT INFORMATION		
Address	16	14
Home phone	11	12+2 office ²
Cell phone	15	5
Email	11	14+2 ³

IUS#4 mentioned that much personal information comes up during the interview process, but that the only personal information they are interested in is the type of information that can have some repercussion on the job performance. IUS#3 was adamant that information about hobbies etc. was unnecessary and repeated often that he preferred that no “ego” came through the résumés “just tell me what you do, not who you are”. On the contrary, ISP#2 said: “Even hobbies are important, since they tell you something about the candidate”.

The only personal information that is present in the US résumés is the candidates' name, address, contact phones (usually home and cell, but in a couple of cases office, and in some others it was not specified) and email address(es). IUS#3 mentioned that he liked the fact that the résumé shown to him had two email addresses, two phone numbers etc. He indicated that the more contact information candidates provide the better.

Although personal information or other types of data were sparse, a variety of different information on candidates was found included under the move Other Data: community service, hobbies, tennis instructor, missionary experience, Eagle Scout, citizenship, availability to travel, etc. Informants, with the exception of IUS#3, were not opposed to this type of information as long as it was relevant or provided useful insights on candidates that could be related to their job performance or gave some indication of their character.

Our findings regarding personal information would lend support to Pan *et al.*'s (2002: 69) belief that the conflict between personal and professional information

² Two résumé writers included their office phone number, along with their home phone number.

³ Two résumé writers provided two e-mail addresses.

is the most relevant aspect of self-presentation in professional international settings. Now we turn to another aspect of self-presentation and professional identity construction that is related to the Utilitarian democratic ideals of equality among the members of the western corporate discourse system.

3.2.3.2. *Distancing from achievements: the «primus inter pares» stance in professional identity construction*

In the previous sections, we have described résumés as a genre by applying Swales's (1990) model: communicative purposes trigger move structure. Thus, we have explained the communicative purpose of résumés, as well as the move structure of the résumés included in our corpus. Also, following Swales's caution to the effect that communicative purpose and particular exemplars of the genre have to be recognized as such by expert members of the parent discourse community, we have documented the perceptions of our informants in relation to both. Swales's more textual approach has been contextualized by Scollon & Scollon's (2001) view of genres as anchored in ideologies. According to them, western corporate discourse is grounded in Utilitarianism, the basis for the C-B-S style that permeates corporate discourse. In our analysis, we have related the emerging regularities in structure to this style. In his model, Swales explains that move structure is realized by genre-specific rhetorical strategies. We now turn our attention to those. Scollon & Scollon also refer to rhetorical strategies as part of the face system of genres, seen as determined by their underlying ideology. The micro-level of the rhetorical strategy – the lexico-syntactic choices candidates make to present themselves – is the locus of the presentation of self and identity construction.

The “expert dilemma” in democratic societies has been discussed by Billig *et al.* (1988) who argue that this ideological quandary between authority and equality is encoded in the discourses of the expert. The dilemma is encoded both in oral and written discourse. The ways experts solve this dilemma are varied, and context-specific. For example, Dyer & Keller Cohen (2000) discuss “doing being ordinary” and self-mockery as the ways two professors resolve this conflict in two narratives inserted in their class lectures, which would constitute an example of the expert dilemma being tackled in spoken discourse. We argue that résumé writers – facing the dilemma of the expert in formal, written discourse – display a stance which we have dubbed *primus inter pares*: they position themselves as experts, but are careful not to threaten other discourse system members' face. They do so (a) by abiding by the constraints of the résumé genre in the given culture – as described above – and (b) by distancing themselves from their accomplishments. We found that the way in which distancing occurs differs in both subcorpora.

All US résumés used action verbs to describe their current or past positions, and all of the résumés (minus one, USR#11) elided all personal pronouns or expressions in the description of previous work experience.

As discussed in section 3.2.2 above, candidates structure their résumés in different moves. When detailing their career progression, for example, they use a re-

verse chronological order, include the time frame, their title and the name of the company in the headline and list below, using bullet points, the different tasks they were involved in. The following is an example taken from USR#2 which is representative of what we have found in all the *résumés* of the US subcorpus.

01/04 to 07/05 - VP Finance. Name of company and sector

- Developed global finance organization to support company/sector's new vision and strategic initiatives
- Re-organized company/sector in Canada, Mexico and South America to better support company's strategic business initiatives in those regions
- Developed processes to measure sector's performance against targets and run sector "like a business"
- Worked to improve sector bill out methodology and communication with company business units
- Developed opportunities outside the USA to leverage company potential in areas such as fleet, communication and travel
- Provided finance training when requested for non-finance managers.

The elision of personal pronouns or determiners is also present in summaries of qualifications, found at the beginning of the *résumé*, where candidates present a high level description of their experience. This excerpt from USR#6 illustrates this point:

Bilingual CPA with broad industry expertise stemming from 12 years of public and private accounting, including Sarbanes-Oxley compliance, complemented by a Master's degree in Accountancy. Experience in high and low technology design and manufacturing, software, agriculture, entertainment, biotech research and publishing industries. Proficient in managing multiple projects simultaneously. Exposure to venture-back start-pos, SEC registrants and privately held corporations.

We would like to argue that elision of personal pronouns and expressions should be considered a very relevant, salient feature of this genre. The grammatical rules of English require the personal pronoun in the conjugation of verbs, as most persons – excluding the third – are not indicated by morphological endings. However, it is the absence rather than the use of pronouns which reveals a salient index of identity construction in this context: quite a unique occurrence. Whereas it could be argued that pronominal elision should be explained in terms of constraints on space – candidates pressed for space omit the pronoun as the agent can be inferred contextually – we believe it would be hard to account for it along those lines. If it were a stylistic choice, its use would not be ubiquitous in the corpus, as style varies. Besides, agents can usually be inferred from context. However, pronouns are not systematically elided from most contexts. Also, both our informants and all how-to guides strongly emphasize the importance of using correct spelling and standard grammar in *résumés*. Pronominal elision in formal, written registers consti-

tutes a violation of Standard English grammar that it would not be advisable for candidates to commit unless it were a genre-sanctioned feature.

More importantly, pronouns have been established in the literature (Bamberg 2000; de Fina *et al.* 2006; Harré & Muhlhauser 1990) as a fundamental part of identity construction, especially within the context of autobiographical narratives, including autobiographical professional narratives (Dyer & Keller-Cohen 2000) of which we have argued résumés constitute a prime example. Harré & Muhlhauser (1990: 92), in their insightful analysis of pronouns, argue that *I* and other expressions are used as indices of location. These expressions carry out a double indexicality. On the one hand, *I* indexes the spatio-temporal location of the utterance to the location of the speaker at the moment of his/her utterance. On the other, *I* indexes the utterance with the person to be held responsible for its illocutionary force, and its perlocutionary effects. They call this second type “responsibility indexing”, as it labels the responsibility of the speaker within a certain moral order where the speaker is responsible for the effects of the utterance. It makes intuitive sense to us that *I* and other personal expressions should be deleted when candidates are trying to distance themselves from the effects of the utterances listed in their résumés.

Most expert members of the parent community in the US context – IUS#1, IUS#2, IUS#3 and IUS#5 – expressed a personal preference for the use of action verbs. IUS#1, IU#4 and IUS#5 indicated that, by using action verbs and eliding the first person subject, candidates can claim participation in processes to which their actual contribution was minimal or peripheral and also present themselves as ‘team players’. IUS#4 opined that emphasis on group rather than on individual achievement has become progressively more valued within American corporate culture. IUS#5 expressed a personal dislike for the over-use of *I*, which he felt conveys a strong sense of self-centredness.

In the Spanish subcorpus, in twelve out of the sixteen résumés analysed, candidates distanced themselves by using nominalizations to describe their work experience. The rest of the Spanish résumés (SPR#3, SPR#4, SPR#9 and SPR#12) just included a list of the companies where candidates had worked and the position they had held, with no reference to the specific functions they had carried out. The example below, taken from SPR#1, is an illustration of the nominalization trend observed in Spanish résumés.

Name of company and sector - 1990-1991

- Responsable de la **homologación** final de los prototipos ante el Laboratorio de Automóviles de la Universidad Politécnica de Madrid y del Instituto de Técnicas Aeroespaciales.
- **Revisión y supervisión** constante de la cadena de montaje de los conflictos y las mejoras que deben adoptarse para que la homologación tenga lugar.
- **Planificación y organización** del departamento de Calidad. Control de inspecciones en la cadena de montaje.

- **Coordinación** con el departamento de Ingeniería en el diseño de componentes para la mejora de la habilitación y la seguridad del producto final.
- **Realización** de pruebas de nuevos productos en el laboratorio de calidad para luego aplicarlos en la cadena de montaje⁴.

Among the wide range of possibilities offered by the Spanish language (Vaquero 2000) such as *se*-passive, plural pronoun or generic *you* as a subject, collective or abstract nouns, or even infinitives, which would seem suitable in this context, nominalization is the main resource chosen by most résumé writers included in our subcorpus to mitigate possible face threat. Nominalizations in Spanish are constructed by adding the derivational suffix *-ción* to an infinitive, thus turning an action into an abstract noun: *administración* (verb: *administrar*), *planificación* (verb: *planificar*), or *supervisión* (verb: *supervisar*). All these forms were found recurrently in the subcorpus. By using nominalization, as was the case with pronoun deletion in the US résumés, personal agency and responsibility in processes – represented here as nouns – are obfuscated (Blackledge 2002: 76). Along the same lines, Brown & Levinson (1987: 208) relate the frequent use of nominalizations to business discourse and argue that:

[...] the more nouny an expression, the more removed an actor is from doing or feeling or being something; instead of the predicate being something attributed to an actor, the actor becomes an attribute [...]. As far as the FTAs [Face-Threatening Act] are concerned, with the progressive removal of the active ‘doing’ part of an expression, the less dangerous it seems to be.

Also, scholars researching Spanish business discourse (Cademartori *et al.* 2006) identified nominalization as a relevant feature, and related it to the willingness of the writer (it is rarely used in spoken discourse) to make participants in the original process referred to by the verb inconspicuous. Thus, nominalizations contribute to the abstraction of the discourse, and separate it from the immediate context and participants.

Following Bruner (1990), Dyer & Keller-Cohen (2000) discuss the distinction between the agentive and epistemic selves. The agentive self relates to the action

⁴ • Person responsible for the Automobile Laboratory of the Polytechnic University of Madrid and the Institute of Aero-space Techniques for the final **homologation** of prototypes.

• Ongoing **supervision and revision** of the assembly line and of the conflicts and improvements that must be adapted to obtain homologation.

• **Planning and organization** of the quality control department. Control of inspections on the assembly line.

• **Coordination**, with the engineering department, to design components that will improve the overall performance and safety of the final product.

• **Completion** of tests on new products in the quality control laboratory so that these could be later incorporated to the assembly line.

and temporal progression of narratives, whereas the epistemic self relates to thoughts, feelings and beliefs. In the construction of professional identities in résumés, candidates in both subcorpora exploited mostly their agentive selves. Candidates present themselves as ‘actors’, which responds to a collective preference stated by US informants “tell me what you do, not who you are”.

As Quigley (2000: 154) very persuasively argues, talking about the construction of self or identity really means talking about a grammatical practice, rather than an abstract theoretical construct. Shotter (1989) points out that grammatical features of language provide choices for distinct positional fields for the subject: which one is selected is always related to “the specific pressures of recipient design” (Fox 1994: 31). This lends support to our thesis that personal pronoun/determiner deletion and nominalizations in this context can be explained in terms of “recipient design” and presentation of self and can be related to the candidates’ intention to distance themselves from their achievements, in accordance with the expectations of the Utilitarian ideology that underlies western corporate discourse.

Further support for our thesis is provided by politeness theory, the quintessential theory of the presentation of self. Although nominalizations and pronominal elision are two different linguistic phenomena, they are both listed by Brown & Levinson (1987: 131) as negative politeness sub-strategies of the macro-strategy: “Communicate Speaker’s want not to impinge on Hearer: Disassociate Speaker and Hearer from the particular infringement”. Bamberg (1997), from a socio-constructionist perspective, agrees with this view as he argues that leaving agents and/or targets indeterminate helps to construct detachment, and is often done for the purposes of saving face.

US and Spanish job candidates included in our study seem to be aware of the need to mitigate threat to face and distance themselves from their accomplishments so as not to come across as too aggressive or boastful, thus threatening prospective employers’ positive face needs. The difference is the type of lexico-syntactic mitigation strategy used.

The widespread use of these two negative politeness strategies in our corpus contrasts with Scollon & Scollon’s (2001) claim to the effect that the western corporate discourse system involves a symmetrical solidarity politeness system, in which all members use involvement (positive politeness, in Brown & Levinson’s 1987 terminology) strategies. Scollon & Scollon (*ibid.*: 128) allow for a limited use of independence (negative politeness) strategies to communicate ‘upwards’ within the system of communication of corporations used for internal consumption – direct reports addressing their bosses, for example. However, they claim that the external system of communication for outward consumption – financial statements, earnings releases – is characterized by a stance of egalitarian communication or symmetrical solidarity. Résumés would be somewhere in between the outward and inward systems of communication, as candidates are members of the corporate discourse system but – not yet – members of the specific corporation, in the case of external candidates, sector or department, in the case of internal can-

didates, to which they are applying for a position or are being considered for an internal promotion. This in-between status may be the reason behind their non-compliance with the discourse system's expectations in terms of usage of rhetorical strategies.

4. Conclusion

We understand *résumés* as an institutional genre, grounded in the Utilitarian ideology that dominates the western corporate discourse system. *Résumés* allow candidates to present themselves to prospective employers and to construct their professional identities. However, the presentation of self is constrained by the genre's allowable contributions in terms of moves and rhetorical strategies. Genres and the presentation of self are context-bound and are thus expected to vary across cultures. Although our conclusions should be regarded as tentative, since our population is small and may not be representative, our goal was to ascertain whether the data pointed to the existence of any differences which could be confirmed by future quantitative studies, between the realization of the same genre in two cultures (US and Spain) in terms of textual realization, i.e. move structure and rhetorical strategies. We focused on the way in which the latter were used by candidates to construct their professional identity as 'experts', to stand out from other candidates at the same time as they attend to their target audience's face needs. We have argued that candidates do so by abiding by the genre's perceived appropriacy norms and by distancing themselves from their achievements by taking a *primus inter pares* stance. After conducting an in-depth, linguistic analysis, we did find substantial differences between the two corpora. The fact that these features are representative of *résumés* in both languages/cultures was corroborated by the ten expert members of the discourse community included in our ethnographic study. It is on the basis of the analysis of the data at hand as well as the insights provided by our informants, each of whom contributed insights based on an average of twenty years of experience in the business world, that we offer the following conclusions.

Regarding the textual aspects of the two subcorpora, our findings show that US *résumés* do not provide any personal data besides name and contact information, mainly due to legal restrictions. This information is, however, included in the Spanish *résumés*, and is considered essential by our informants. The other moves in both subcorpora are very similar, which would be expected since both cultures are western and thus grounded in the Utilitarian discourse system. However, there is a discrepancy in the order in which the Education and Professional Experience moves appear. Whereas US *résumés* show a preference for having Professional Experience precede Education, Education precedes Experience in the Spanish subcorpus. Additionally, there is information such as the knowledge of foreign languages that is very relevant for Spanish candidates, and secondary or non-existent for US candidates. *Résumés* in the US subcorpus are longer than those in the

Spanish one, and do not always follow the ‘two page rule’ that informants and how-to manuals champion as the maximum length. Also, bullet points seem to be the preferred format by both candidates and informants, with very few exceptions. There is unanimous agreement, however, that honesty is paramount and all facts included in a résumé should be true.

In terms of the rhetorical strategies candidates used to construct their professional identities as experts as well as to maintain their target audience’s positive face needs, we found that candidates in both subcorpora encoded in their discourse the ‘dilemma’ of experts in democratic societies, which also constrains the presentation of self within the corporate discourse system. Candidates mitigated possible threats to face and took the *primus inter pares* stance by distancing themselves from their achievements. In the US subcorpus, this was accomplished by impersonalization as candidates omitted all first person personal pronouns or determiners. This omission emerges as a salient feature of the résumé genre, as it supposes an infringement of the grammatical rules of the English language. In the Spanish subcorpus, candidates encoded their accomplishments as nominalizations. Pronoun deletion and nominalization, although different from a lexico-syntactic perspective, are two sub-strategies subsumed under Brown & Levinson’s (1987) negative politeness strategy: “Communicate Speaker’s want not to impinge on Hearer: Disassociate Speaker and Hearer from the particular infringement”. This clearly indicates candidates’ awareness of the need to mitigate their accomplishments, albeit realizing that need by a different choice of politeness sub-strategy.

Although all résumés in both subcorpora were far from identical, we have observed clear regularities that would seem to confirm, albeit tentatively, our initial expectations regarding the realization of the same genre in two different cultures. However, the fact that they do differ from each other, as do informants’ preferences in terms of contents and style, supports Blackburn-Brockman & Belanger’s (2001: 41) claim that “no ideal or correct résumé format exists”.

It is far from our intention to be normative and to present ‘the way’ ESP practitioners or students should tackle résumé writing. Our main goal was to help fill in the void of research-based materials that can be used as foundations and guidelines for intercultural job searchers. Résumés have received little attention in linguistics-related fields. Even less attention has been paid to the cross-cultural realization of the genre. We see our work as a step to rectify that situation which will undoubtedly be advanced by much needed further research on the subject.

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